

#8 Washington Square,  
New York City.  
New York Co.

HABS No. 4-16.C

HABS  
NY,  
31-NEYO,  
18-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4  
Southern New York State

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,  
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

#8 WASHINGTON SQUARE

Borough of Manhattan, New York City

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18-Introductory Note

When Mrs. Robert W. de Forest, the present owner of #8 Washington Square was asked for certain information concerning dates of alterations to the house, she very kindly offered to put in writing her remembrances as regards the house and its history. However, she protested earnestly against the fact that #8 had been the subject of the survey instead of #7, where she lives. From preliminary investigation, the District Officer had found that #8 was as little changed on the interior as any of the houses in "The Row"; furthermore, Mrs. de Forest was spending the winter in California and it would have been impossible to make the survey during her absence.

Mrs. de Forest, because of her interest in her own house has written a rather complete history of it, with a few additional notes concerning #8. However, much of the material refers to the whole row of houses and therefore applies to #8 as well as #7.

Mr. Johnston, Mrs. de Forest's father, was the first president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and her husband, Robert W. de Forest, was the second president of the same museum, serving until his death three years ago. She herself is now 83 years old, but retaining a remarkably clear memory of the events of a full life.

Because of Mrs. de Forest's intimate knowledge of these houses and the neighborhood, it has seemed well to present here her notes, exactly as she wrote them.

*Wm. Dewey Foster*  
Wm. Dewey Foster,  
District Officer.

May 11, 1934

*Reviewed 1936 H.C.F.*

HISTORY OF NO. 8 WASHINGTON SQUARE  
NEW YORK

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This house was owned by a Scotchman, John McGregor, Jr., and I think was built by him. He was an intimate friend of my grandfather, John Johnston, who was also a Scotchman. When my grandfather was abroad in 1832 and 1833, and was buying or ordering things for his own house, No. 7 Washington Square, he generally ordered duplicates for his two neighbors, Mr. McGregor at No. 8 and Mr. Saul Alley at No. 6. That is why all these houses had approximately the same Italian white marble mantels and French gilt and bronze chandeliers, with candelabras to match.

After I had, in 1879, inherited my grandmother's house at No. 7 Washington Square, and we, the R.W. de F. family, were living there, the houses Nos. 1, 2, 5, 6 and 8 came into the market, and we bought them all, partly to protect the light and air in our rear and partly so that we might sell these houses to friends whom we would like to have as neighbors. We disposed of all the other houses but I still own No. 8 and have rented it to friends. Fortunately for us No. 8 was not rented in 1904 when we decided to take 25 feet off the end of that lot and build a "Pottery Museum" there.

No. 8 was originally only two rooms deep, just as No. 7 and No. 6 and most of the other houses were. I cannot exactly remember when the new dining room was built there, but I am almost sure that it was 1887.

ALTERATIONS IN THE "ROW" OF HOUSES ON  
NORTH WASHINGTON SQUARE.

There used to be a balustrade exactly the same on all the roofs of the houses. This balustrade has been removed except on houses Nos. 12 and 13, on the corner of Fifth Avenue. The old balustrade can be seen there. It was very beautiful but not very practical. The snow used to collect back of it and although I was one of the last owners to remove it from my roof I was finally convinced that it was dangerous to try and take care of the snow behind the balustrade.

The attic windows on the fronts of the houses had a kind of Grecian moulding fitted into them. These mouldings were pretty but they also have been removed by everybody except the houses Nos. 12 and 13, where they can be seen today. The front windows in the attics were very small and the panels which were attached to the window frames by hooks, cut out more than half of the light. Most people in the "Row" used the rear rooms only for their servants, but I needed more space than that and I obtained it by taking the ornamental panels out of the windows.

At the foot of the front steps there were alternating black and white marble squares, about 10 or 12 inches square, which were placed in bias alternation. This held good also in the pathway going toward the basement door. These marble slabs, or squares, became very much broken up through so many years' use and finally everybody, I think, has removed them.

Outside of the iron railings there used to be foot scrapers to remove either mud or snow I suppose, before one went up the beautiful white marble steps. Each house had these scrapers. The remains of

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my scraper were here a year or two ago when I had some iron work on the front gate repaired and the people who did the work took it upon themselves to throw away my scraper. I think one or two scrapers are still extant. No. 10 may have one. They really gave a very old fashioned look to the front of the house.

Another thing had to be done away with by orders of the authorities. Each house had little gutters running from the grass plots out to the street. Water from the melted snow and rain off the roof ran from the drain pipe into the little gutter across the pavement. The authorities obliged us to remove these because they said people tripped over them.

Only one serious change was made in the inside of No.7. There used to be columns between the parlor and the drawing room and the big mahogany doors slipped in between these two pairs of columns. These columns were very handsome and in most of the other houses they are still in place, but we had a number of large pieces of furniture and found the columns very much in the way. We experimented with taking one down and then took them all down. I have always been a little sorry about this.

The special reason that I have been sorry you chose the exterior of No.8 as your model is that there have been more changes there than in any of the other houses except No.3 (which was completely altered into a foundling asylum). In the first place I do not like the hedge in front of No.8. Nobody ever had hedges around the grass plots in the early days, and they have taken away the grass and put down gravel instead on the two small plots. Then worst of all one of my early tenants in

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Alterations - North Washington Square

that house brought home from Paris two roosters, or as she called them "My Cocks", and put them at the foot of the steps. This was in 1908 or 1909.

Written May 10, 1934

By

*Gusby Johnston de Forest*

Mrs. Robert W. de Forest,  
7 Washington Square, North  
New York City.

Approved:

*Wm. Duway Foster*

*Reviewed 1934, H. C. Forman*

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ADDITIONAL NOTES

Regarding "The Row" of houses  
on North Washington Square

Written after consulting Officials of  
Sailors' Snug Harbor, Owners of the land

The leaders in this movement to lease land and build houses on North Washington Square appear to have been James Boorman, John Johnston and John Morrison.

There were originally 14 plots, which meant about  $27\frac{1}{2}$  feet for each plot but the owners of the plots from No. 6 to No. 14 wished to widen their plots and decided to eliminate No. 14 and divide the extra land between these 8 lots, making them each about 30 feet wide.

Mr. Johnston took two lots, Nos. 6 and 7, but wishing a larger lot for himself made his No. 6 lot to match the narrower lots from No. 1 to No. 5, thus making his No. 6 lot about  $27\frac{1}{2}$  feet and gaining  $2\frac{1}{2}$  extra feet, that is, a total of 32 feet 4 inches, which makes his house a little wider than any other house in "The Row".

I append a few notes sent to me by the present Comptroller of "The Sailors' Snug Harbor in the City of New York", the owner of all the land, but not of the houses.

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Houses on North Washington Square  
Land leased from Sailors' Snug Harbor  
Leased for 21 years from May 1, 1831

Leased to

Assigned to

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<u>Lot No.</u>	<u>Year</u>	
1. William B. Lawrence	1855	Stephen Allen
2. William B. Lawrence	1833	Shepard Knapp
3. Henry Rankin		
4. Samuel Thompson	1833	Judge Oakley
5. Edward A. Nicoll	1833	James Talmadge
6. John Johnston	1833	Saul Alley
7. John Johnston		John Johnston
8. John Johnston	1831	John MacGregor, Jr.
	1852	Mrs. Mary MacGregor, widow of J. Mac G. Jr.
9. John Morrison		John Morrison
	Later	George Griswold
10. John Morrison		William Kelly
	Later	John C. Green
11. Thomas Suffern		Thomas Suffern
12. James Boorman		Samuel Downer
13. James Boorman		James Boorman



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Notes to Mrs. de Forest  
from Sailors' Snug Harbor

"Response to your letter of the 16th has been somewhat delayed due to pressure of other matters, and time necessary to consult our records, but I am now happy to reply to your questions as follows:

"According to our records the lots on North Washington Square were leased for 21 years from May 1, 1831.

"According to the record, in September, 1831, application was made to the Board of Trustees by Messrs Boorman, Johnston and John Morrison to merge the eight lots leased by them from the Trustees into seven lots 'to suit their purpose', which application was granted, and there was a merging of the lots, premises No. 7 being increased from a frontage of 27.3 to 32.4 feet, and the other lots being increased, resulting in the lot nearest to Fifth Avenue being eliminated entirely, so that there are only 13 now in the strip as against 14 formerly.

"The 'MacGregor' who is listed above as having been permitted to take parts of Nos. 8 and 9 was apparently John MacGregor, Jr., as in 1852 a lease was made of premises No. 8 for a period of 21 years to 'Mrs. Mary MacGregor, widow of John MacGregor, Jr. deceased,' which refers to lease made April 30, 1831, to said John MacGregor of 'parts of lots'.

"The above, as is so often the case in dealing with old records, is rather involved."

*Emily de Forest de Forest*

Mrs. Robert W. de Forest  
7 Washington Square, North  
New York City.